

WOMEN POWER IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S EAST

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ABSTRACT

There have been varied and contrasting opinions of critics surrounding the female characters created by Salman Rushdie. The present paper attempts to show that women in East in Salman Rushdie's East, West can actually be seen as wielding power in their own ways. The paper restricts the comparison of women in East, West to the female characters in Shame and tries to put forth the idea that female characters in this section of the book do show fortitude and patience in controlling men surrounding them. Seen from the eyes of men, all three characters are termed beautiful (6, 7, 20, 37) nevertheless they are the ones to overpower them not with beauty but with intellect (Rehana), strong will (thief's wife), and fortitude (Huma).

KEYWORDS: Women, Power, Fortitude, Dominance, Patriarchy

INTRODUCTION

'East, West' by Salman Rushdie is a collection of short stories representing a multitude of themes- ranging from the portraiture of east and west, their contrasts, beyond the contrast a possible fusion, woven in between with sub themes of women, religion, society, history, politics and economic issues in various hues and shades.

The diverse images of women as represented by Salman Rushdie, bathed in history, religion and politics, are coloured by brushes of identity crisis and torture within themselves to understand their true persona. Women face a multitude of contrasting and complex emotions trying to come to terms with themselves. Most critics hold the opinion that characters in Rushdie can be comprehended properly only if his background and his distance from it are understood. Though many of Rushdie's novels are called women centric but the portrayal of women depends to a large extent on events of real time phenomena in Pakistan. Termed as a hater of womankind, he portrays women in Shame at a loss with themselves, having no sense of who they are so much so that they appear to be distraught, mentally disturbed and frigid. (Ahmad 123-58). Again, there are two contrary images of women in Shame wherein one feels sympathetic and unsympathetic, at the same time, towards the female characters, depending on their projection and representation (Ahmad, 104). Female characters are shown to be mere carriers of patriarchal power and vis-a-vis their role in the story, where the creator of such characters, tells only half the truth as women in Pakistan were resisting male dominance and patriarchy (Grewal 123-44). The female characters are reflections of history of Pakistan and their mood swings can be attributed to vicissitudes in the history of the country (Raza, 55-62). Women in Shame are generally devoid of power. (Goonetilleke, 63).

The present paper examines the possibility of looking at women, created by Rushdie, not as mere receptacles of male dominance or symbols suffering at the hands of patriarchy but as women who are in control of themselves, are strong willed, confident and defiant though submerged in a male dominant world. All the three women in the section east namely

Rehana, Huma and the thief's widow, are preys to searching eyes of men and for whom roles have already been set. Any departure from the set role models invites the wrath of others especially on the thief's wife and Huma. Women in the three short stories have been portrayed from different socio-economic levels and each one of them stands out as symbols of latent power. Weaving one's way through the short stories in this collection 'East, West', one can see the different shades of life and power that these women characters represent. Limiting the present paper to the women in the first section of the book, one can smell the strong personality traits in these characters who are balanced, poised, strong willed, determined and result oriented.

In the first story 'Good Advice is Rarer than Rubies', the big eyed Rehana arrives in the bus bewitching both Ali and the gate keeper. The protagonist in this story arrives at the British Consulate in a veil of dust unlike many other women around her who are in burquas or bare faced. Unlike all other women she is entirely on her- without a male company. She is the "big eyed independent" girl who does not need support or shelter from others as she is not frightened of anyone or anything. She has the power to charm men right from the bus driver to the Lala or Muhammad Ali who move towards her. Rehana has that mystifying power by virtue of which people forget their usual rudeness or begin to bow "theatrically" (5). Rehana (Byron 1-4):

"She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies,
And all that's best of dark and bright
Meets in her aspect and her eyes"

She is the prime mover, the action provider in the story; things and people revolve around her. Muhammad Ali finds himself "becoming young again" and "found his feet leading him"(5). She is that vital part in the story which gives and sustains life around it. The Lala, usually so rude, seems to have found good words for her in comparison to those whom he disregarded as a custom. While others are leaning symbiotically on others for strength and sustenance, Rehana can stand the ground on her own confidently, so much so, that a gaze from her "did bad things" to Ali's digestive tract (6).

Not only is she physically beautiful but also sound in courtesy. She has been good enough to compliment the driver of the bus on its beauty. Though an orphan, her grooming is praiseworthy (Byron 11-12)

The mind and heart are praiseworthy:
"Where thoughts serenely sweet express
How pure, how dear their dwelling place."

Rehana is not a cheat therefore admits not having sufficient to pay him, acknowledging at the same time that "good advice is rarer than rubies". She does not misjudge him or show condescension thereby meaning that the advice he shall give her will be as worthy as a gem. Her inability to pay for his good advice does not stop her from urging him so that "good advice should find good money" (7). Since Ali was "going crazy" in the company of Rehana he promises to give her his advice sans any charge. Rehana agrees to listen to his advice and accordingly, Ali jumps to offer his services very well aware of the eyes of the crowd "ogling" at the two of them. Rushdie compares her to a sparrow while the others were hawks. Ali in his set of good advice makes sure that Rehana is not shocked by the kind of personal or irrelevant questions

that the English Sahibs ask her. Even if there was a hint of fear or restlessness in her voice, she sees to it that she get over with it by the time her turn came by trying hard to “discipline” her voice. Ali as enamoured as he is with Rehana is forced to reveal his secret- “you are a rare person, a jewel, and for you I will do what I would not do for my own daughter, perhaps” (11). This was his day of “insanity” and he could see himself throwing the passport to her “freegratis”. Rehana as we see more of her remains untouched with his plan of forgery as she is grounded soundly. She is level headed and is able to see the right and the wrong. She fails to be trapped by his plans and walks away. In fact Rehana emerges as a sounding board for Ali and tells him that his idea was not worth what it promised as that would mean cheating and forgery and thereby “not good advice”. The sahibs in their own way would be justified in having a low opinion of them.

When she comes out from the Consulate she is calm and peaceful and greets her “advice wallah”. He surmises by the look she carries on her face that she has been successful because like him, the sahibs have been “drowning” in her eyes. She has a sound bearing and asks for forgiveness for her rudeness. Rehana finds a friend in him and tells him everything about herself. She is in no doubt about her fiancé and his distance from her, physically and agewise-ly. He congratulates her and tells there is enough to learn about him once she was there but there is a bitterness in her smile. She then reveals to him that it was she and not the sahibs who could decide her fate. She purposely had:

“Distinguishing marks I put on the wrong cheeks, bathroom décor I completely redecorated, all absolutely topsy-turvy, you see.”(15).

“Her last smile, which he watched from the compound until the bus concealed it in a dust cloud, was the happiest thing he had ever seen in his long, hot, hard, unloving life.”(15).

Rehana is made of solid wood, firm as ever about what was good and what was bad, not being bullied into any kind of wrong doing. There is not a single hint of wavering; any doubt about what was the defining line for her. Though she is beautiful but she is not seen using it to her advantage which she could have as getting a visa was a difficult task and there were hordes of people wanting it and ready to go through the harsh and unnerving experience. She knows that the advice is not free and that is why refuses the advice since she knows she does not have money to pay for it. Portrayed as a typical Asian woman who is submissive, shy, timid but through the story and more towards the end we find that incorporating all the Asian traits she is still not weak or meek.

The female character in ‘The Free Radio’ is introduced as having her “claws dug into his flesh”(19), where ‘his’ refers to Ramani, a boy who had been duped by the thief’s widow, the female character, even “before the hairs had time to come out on his chin, before his milk teeth had split, one might say.”(19). Soon we find out that the widow was “certainly attractive” but it was her mentality which was “rotten” and who was ten years older (“must have been”) than Ramani and that her husband had “left her not one new paisa” which is why she was after Ramani’s life (20). This character does not have a name as she is throughout mentioned as she and her. The narrator doubts her integrity “I won’t say where the money came from, but people saw men at night near her rutputty shack” which is how she has been able to keep herself and her five children alive (20). Soon Ramani was to be seen with the widow and her kids everywhere. While other youngsters of the same age as Ramani cheated him of money, the narrator blames her: “I blame the widow woman, because she had more years and should have had more sense(22). In fact she is labelled as being shameless because she claims in public “Truly you have the looks of Lord Krishna himself, except you are not blue all over.”(23). The narrator thinks it is his responsibility to check Ramani as Ramani’s deceased parents were his acquaintances and he feels it is his duty to save him from the widow’s clasps/web. He advises her to go to Benares, a place meant for widows.

She then reveals that Ramani had asked her for marriage and she very clear in her motives had refused it as she did not want anymore children.

“Let me tell you, mister teacher sahib retired, that your Ramani has asked to marry me and I have said no, because I wish no more children, and he is a young man and should have his own. So tell that to the whole world and stop your cobra poison.”(24) The widow being wicked finds evidence in the incident when the health officer in the caravan is carrying out sterilization and the people undergoing this surgery were promised gifts from the Central Government. Her wickedness is public as she is suspected to have forced him to get sterilized and that is the reason why Ramani is going wild about receiving this free gift from the government. It is easy at this juncture in this story to put two and two together and conclude that the widow gets married to Ramani after he gets sterilized as was obvious in () above. On the other hand we find Ramani claiming: “I am in love, teacher sahib, and I have made it possible for me to marry my woman.” by being deprived of his manhood (25). The narrator suspects that the widow after being married to Ramani did not venture to the town anymore as she was “too ashamed of what she had made him do” but at the same time Ramani worked longer hours than ever before. However it was a matter of few days as Ramani was soon found “strained”. The truth was that the widow had forced him “to rob himself”. Later Ramani’s wife had taught him “not to be humble in the presence of elders”. The conclusion says that the widow was well and happy and getting fat”.

Ramani’s wife, a nameless character, is portrayed as the prime factor in Ramani’s life. She is the “centre” and the world of Ramani falls apart if the woman is not referred to. “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold”.(Yeats). Ramani is seen with the woman everywhere and this is what irritates the narrator. He thinks that the woman has got hideous plans for Ramani and that Ramani being an immature, churlish person is bound to fall in the pit dug by the woman. Being a well wisher of Ramani and his parents, the author tries to dissuade her from clutching him. Seen from the eyes of the narrator she is a worthless person, trying to make the most of the situation and does not restrain himself from calling her a whore. Nobody questions Ramani or reprimands him for his doing. It is only the woman, seen from the eyes of a man, that she is shown in a negative light, depending for her survival like a parasite on him. Wherever she goes there are village folks deriding her, calling her names, slaughtering her image and abusing her, which could also have been directed at Ramani who decided to be robbed by the woman and her wily ways “because she made him rob himself” (28). But Ramani is portrayed as a scapegoat, falling for her lascivious ways. She is a second rate citizen, a subaltern in the eyes of the world. Despite the ridicule and sarcasm directed at her, she holds onto her ground. She is in no doubt, does not waver but keeps a stolid countenance except at times, choosing not to reply to the affronts at hers. She is clear about what she wants- the guardian to her children- and she gets that. She is thereby a strong woman because she is able to achieve what she has planned. She is intelligent enough to force Ramani for the operation because she does not want anymore children. She can be termed as wise and farsighted because she has an aim in life and does not lose her way by paying heed to other people’s calumnies and brickbats.

Huma is the next character in story ‘The Prophet’s Hair’ in the East series. Huma is introduced as the “beautiful but inexplicably bruised” (36) sister of Atta in this story. Her exceptional beauty cannot be hidden from the eye as it “was visible even through the enormous welts and bruises disfiguring her arms and forehead”(37). It is disclosed later in the story that she was the daughter of a money lender, Hashim, who taught his children “virtues of thrift, plain dealing and healthy independence of spirit”(42). The moneylender is also a collector who has swords, spears and terracotta animals in his collection and decides on keeping the Prophet’s hair- a newly founded artefact. With this latest addition to his

collection, strange things start happening to him and his family. He is found saying hideous things, to “spume long streams of awful truths” (45) including a fresh set of advisory for his daughter. She was hitherto labelled as lascivious by her father as she did not cover her face. Decrees like reading the Quran at least two hours daily for every member in the household, Huma to stay away from Atta's male friends visited- were passed in the household. Huma takes things in her stride and challenges Hashim by refusing to cover her face:” challenged her father openly, and announced (with that same independence of spirit which he had encouraged in her) that she would wear no cloth over her face”. Hashim hearing all this disowns her and gives her one week to leave the house. She then decides to hire thieves to steal the hair as it had become a bad omen for the family. She then is determined to get rid of the ominous hair by hiring professional thieves to be rewarded handsomely on completion of the job.. On the day of the theft, Huma gets killed by her father who mistakes her for a thief.

Huma can do her job very well before she ventures into her adventure of hiring a thief to steal the ominous Prophet's hair from her house. Atta who had failed miserably in the same venture, in the hands of thieves, has set a lesson for his sister to learn. She leaves no stone unturned for her personal safety as she prepares a letter which spelt out the ifs and buts in case she did not reach home safe and sound.

CONCLUSIONS

She in her fortitude was led to the ‘Sheikh Sin, the Thief of Thieves’ to carry out the task of stealing the hair which could not be accomplished by her brother, Atta. In fact, Atta had been seriously hurt and was in coma thereafter. It is her bad luck that she fails to accomplish the task she had promised to do.

Though surrounded in the shroud of male dominance, all the three women in the East section of the book emerge successful in completing the task they had promised themselves. No matter who they meet and circumstances they encounter, all the three of them epitomise success, silently. Neither Rehana nor Huma speak or act but both exude confidence in the way they handle matters. So much so that the reader looks up to them for their quiet power game they play. It is only Ramani's wife who is loud and speaks out her mind to people who trouble her. But she is successful in keeping her husband tied to her. The stories in East may therefore be read as stories of quiet and complacent power play that women can engage in. The women discussed in this paper are emblematic of authority all the more as they are submerged in a milieu full of men. These women are not self effacing, rather a symbol of self imposing. Rehana- silent armour of power; Ramani's wife- boisterous and Huma- the challenge to patriarchy. These female protagonists are not mere stereotypes as presented in the stories, they are liberated women who can use their will power to act for themselves. These strong characters defy the oft quoted line: Frailty thy name is woman.(Hamlet I ii 146).

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